



# The Max Palevsky Collection of Japanese Woodblock Prints

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Pavilion for Japanese Art

Los Angeles County Museum of Art



Figure 1

Ishikawa Toyonobu (Japan, 1711–1785),  
*A Beauty Entering the Bath*, color woodblock print  
(benizuri-e), 10½ x 5¾ in. (27.2 x 13.5 cm), Max  
Palevsky Collection



In the West, Japanese woodblock prints are the best-known form of Japanese art. The names Hokusai, Utamaro, and Hiroshige are familiar to many, and the term *ukiyo-e* ("pictures of the floating world") is synonymous with Japanese prints. In fact, the term refers to both prints and paintings that depict the transitory life (hence "floating world") of the entertainment and theater districts of large cities during the Edo period (1615–1868). Actors from the Kabuki theater and courtesans of the pleasure quarters are the stars: Through these images, the public could track their favorite actors and learn of the newest hair and dress fashions among the demimonde. Later, artists such as Hokusai and Hiroshige pioneered the category of landscape prints, depicting famous places from all over Japan. Many *ukiyo-e* artists made both paintings and prints, while others specialized in one or the other. *Ukiyo-e* prints are far more numerous than *ukiyo-e* paintings, as they were often produced in large editions. Single-sheet images are the most distinctive, but woodblock prints were commonly used for book illustrations, albums, and greeting cards; all of these were produced in a variety of impressions, from inexpensive mass printings to small luxury editions for the privileged few.

An artist would design a print, but its actual execution was in the hands of highly skilled block carvers and colorists. The publisher acted as a director, helping the artist achieve his vision through these craftsmen. A single print often uses as many as twenty colors, each printed with a different woodblock. A master craftsman ensured that the blocks aligned perfectly so that there was no overlap of different colors. The gradation from dark to light within one color was achieved by partially wiping a block after the application of pigment. Editions of a single print would go into the thousands, depending solely on sales demand; the early editions were always more carefully printed from freshly carved blocks with sharp outlines. The earliest prints bear censor marks that guarantee that the government censors approved the issuance of the print and that it contained no offensive or subversive subject matter.

Figure 2

Suzuki Harunobu (Japan, 1724–1770),  
*Beauty Performing Ohyakudo Supplication Ceremony*,  
c. 1765–66, color woodblock print, 10⅓ x 7⅓ in. (27.5 x 19.8 cm),  
Max Palevsky Collection

Since the colors used in Japanese woodblock prints are highly fugitive (they fade with exposure to light), they were originally displayed in albums; they were never framed and hung in a Japanese interior. Only by viewing prints in excellent condition with undiminished color, such as these, can we understand their spectacular beauty.

The Max Palevsky Collection of Japanese Woodblock Prints comprises fifty prints, a self-imposed limit that forces the collector to part with a work in order to acquire a new one. This strategy throws into high relief the qualitative differences between individual prints and demands tremendous discipline from the collector, who must face increasingly difficult choices.

Viewed chronologically, the collection begins with several so-called primitives—prints made using only two or three blocks, creating a limited but effective palette. Two pioneers in this area, Okumura Masanobu (1686–1764) and Ishikawa Toyonobu (1711–1785), are each represented in the collection by one print. The Masanobu work depicts a young man disguised as an itinerant monk; the Toyonobu is a subtly erotic image of a young beauty removing her *yukata* (robe) as she enters the bath (fig. 1).





Figure 3

Kitagawa Utamaro (Japan, 1754–1806),  
*Young Woman Smoking*, c. 1792–93,  
color woodblock print with mica, 14½ x 10 in. (37.1 x 25.5 cm);  
Max Palevsky Collection

The Palevsky collection is dominated by works created by the greatest artists from the Golden Age of Japanese prints: Harunobu, Utamaro, and Hokusai. The first, Suzuki Harunobu (1725–1770), came into fashion with the 1764 revolution in polychrome printing, in which multiple blocks were employed to create richly colored images. Harunobu portrays innocent young beauties in a variety of daily activities; his prints are immediately identifiable by their limpid, clear space, delicate colors, and elegant lines. All of these qualities are embodied in *Beauty Performing Ohyakudo Supplication Ceremony* (fig. 2) and *Two Women on a Beach* (fig. 4). The Palevsky collection includes eleven Harunobu masterworks in impeccable condition, affording us a rare glimpse into the world of this master artist and his time.

Kitagawa Utamaro (1753–1806) is one of the best-known and most influential ukiyo-e artists. He is particularly famous for his renditions of beauties in the tea-houses and pleasure quarters of Edo (present-day Tokyo). Of the six masterworks by Utamaro in the Palevsky collection, two highlight vital aspects of the artist's style. In *Young Woman Smoking* (fig. 3), from the celebrated series *Ten Classes of Women's Physiognomy*, a hardened inhabitant of the pleasure quarters is shown without pretense in a moment of relaxation. *Needlework Interrupted by a Cat* (fig. 5) captures a playful moment as a cat becomes entangled in a piece of cloth being sewn by a beautiful woman. The immaculate condition of this print allows us to appreciate the great skill of the artisans who carved and colored the multiple woodblocks. Three shades of purple are employed with the utmost delicacy to convey the transparency of the silk cloth the beauty holds in her teeth.

Figure 4

Suzuki Harunobu (Japan, 1724–1770),  
*Two Women on a Beach*, 1767,  
color woodblock print,  
11 x 8½ in. (27.8 x 20.7 cm),  
Max Palevsky Collection





Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849) is one of the great figures in the history of world art; two of his prints, nicknamed “Great Wave” and “Red Fuji,” are signature images of Japanese art around the world. Hokusai is the undisputed master of the landscape print: Two of his best-known series are the Thirty-six Views of Mt. Fuji and the eight Waterfall prints.

The Palevsky collection contains eight superb examples from the Thirty-six Views. In *Kajikazawa in Kai Province* (fig. 6), Hokusai creates a daring triangular composition framed by the rock promontory and the fisherman’s lines, echoing the shape of Mt. Fuji in the distance. *Couriers Leaving Sekiya Village on the Sumida River* (fig. 7) vividly conveys the speed and motion of men on horseback on an urgent mission. Perhaps the peak of Japanese landscape imagery, the Thirty-six Views (the complete series actually contains forty-six prints) are as varied in mood, color, temperament, and composition as could be imagined: Each image stands on its own as the signature view of its designated place.



*Kajikazawa in Kai Province*

Katsushika Hokusai (Japan, 1760–1849)  
*Kajikazawa in Kai Province*, c. 1830–32,  
from the series *Thirty-six Views of Mt. Fuji*, color  
woodblock print,  $10\frac{1}{4} \times 15\frac{1}{4}$  in. (25.6 x 38.4 cm),  
Max Palevsky Collection

*Needlework Interrupted by a Cat*

Kitagawa Utamaro (Japan, 1754–1806),  
*Needlework Interrupted by a Cat* (detail), c. 1797–98,  
color woodblock print,  $15\frac{1}{4} \times 10\frac{1}{4}$  in. (38.7 x 26.1 cm),  
Max Palevsky Collection

The Palevsky collection also contains a pristine set of the Waterfalls. Originally planned as a larger group, they form one of the most consistent ensembles in Hokusai's vast output. Yet each of the prints conveys the individual character of its place, entirely distinct from the others. In the image of Kirifuri Falls (fig. 8, cover), the streams of water are like veins or ligaments, almost palpably chewy.

There are twenty-one Hokusai prints in the Palevsky collection, by far its largest holding of any single artist's work. Their bold composition, startling color, and unexpected vantage points combine to produce images of unprecedented originality. Hokusai was truly, as one of his self-given names puts it, "an old man mad about painting."

The Palevsky collection exhibits uniformly superb quality, both in the condition of the prints and in the originality of the compositions. Each print reveals the discerning eye of a connoisseur; together, the fifty works represent a distillation of astonishing beauty.



This exhibition was organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. It was curated by Robert T. Singer, curator of Japanese art, and Hollis Goodall, associate curator of Japanese art.

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*Couriers Leaving Sekiya Village on the Sumida River*  
Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849),  
c. 1830–32, from the series Thirty-six Views of Mt. Fuji  
color woodblock print, 10 1/4 x 14 1/2 in. (25.4 x 37.2 cm).  
Max Palevsky Collection

*Falls of Kirifuri at Mt. Kurokami*,  
Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849),  
c. 1832, from the series A Tour of Japanese Waterfalls,  
color woodblock print, 14 1/4 x 9 7/8 in. (37.2 x 25.0 cm).  
Max Palevsky Collection